

Historically set in the well-established Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Antoninus Pius in the second century A.D., William V. Crockett's *A Celt in Rome* is a unique novel that sets a picture of the times and setting that the early church was based in. Though a fictional account, the characters of the novel are articulately designed to play a major role in establishing very real historical situations and conflicts that are integral in creating a setting conducive to the early church period. By doing so, we see multitudes of themes and points of contention from the historical setting of the New Testament arise that draw a bigger picture of the early church context throughout the text. Through these hallmarks of Roman society, a larger picture of the New Testament period is drawn. In particular, themes of Greco-Roman religion and travel arise that paint a landscape of the Roman Empire in the second century that better enhances the reality early Christians faced.

After the rise and spread of Hellenism in the Roman Empire, polytheism was adopted into Roman society. This was evidenced by the vernacular of characters like Neeve who linked the influence of the gods to the daily life of the individual. Religion was integral to community life, family life, and the private aspirations of individuals.¹ Multitudes of practices from spiritual perceptions of ethereal beings to views on human relationships and supernatural activity were adopted from the Greek-inspired times. However, in the text, Neeve notices a particular decline in Greco-Roman religious practices, alluding to the gods as “fables” and simply kept around for belief in “good fortunes” and their symbolism for loyalty to the state.² This comes as a marked contrast to the zealous followers of “the Way,” who taught that “to acknowledge other gods is to

¹ Joel Green and Lee Martin McDonald, editors. *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 122.

² William V. Crockett. *A Celt in Rome*. (Hudson Publishing, 2012), 275.

deny the one true God...we are called to be witnesses to this truth, even if it means death”³ and that “if you deny Chrestus before men, he will deny you before God in heaven.”⁴ Seeing the tie of the pantheon to the empire itself, it is very easy to better understand why the early Christians marked as “the Way” could be deemed treasonous. To give a monotheistic God not tied to the polytheistic empire divine authority implied rebellion against the emperor. That surely deserved death.

The influence of travel in the Roman Empire also outlined a deeper layer of context during the New Testament times. *A Celt in Rome* designates an entire section of the text to better deal with the illustrious road system of the Romans. On one end, the mobility of the Roman Empire and its immense road system provided a network that naturally linked major cities for all to access. Because of this, the urban centers became the hubs for church growth that naturally moved outward. On another end, careful wording is used to describe the inherently dangerous nature of the road systems such as Neeve’s constant fear of being caught and raped⁵ as well as Brutus’ acknowledgement of the ever-present thieves and murderous villains that lurk.⁶ Vectis’ five-day journey that was supposedly advertised for comfort was actually riddled with discomfort and tagged with the satirical warning: “even the fool knew enough to keep awake in a Roman carriage.”⁷ As Neeve’s near-death experience during the winter showed,⁸ even the unpredictability of the weather patterns of the waterways used for travel during the times meant that long travels via boat were a seismic risk as well. This all creates a picture of the inconvenience faced when traveling within the Roman Empire, and many of the biblical writings

³ *Ibid*, 369.

⁴ *Ibid*, 385.

⁵ *Ibid*, 112.

⁶ *Ibid*, 209.

⁷ *Ibid*, 89.

⁸ *Ibid*, 156.

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that detail a bigger picture of the travels of members of the early church such as Paul. The transient nature of the early church is now better explained by this structure of travel and better contextualizes why much of Paul's written works to the church were letters and not more established documents.

Crockett does very well to blend extrapolated elements of literary prose with bits of historical truths based off of evidently thorough research. It is clear that much of the dialogue and other literary elements that Crockett uses all throughout the text match contemporary thought processes in order to relativize these fictitious characters and to establish a plot. Additional plot lines such as political ambitions and intertwined love interests also seem more geared towards preparing a narrative over true historical reliability. However, it is clear that he mostly established the setting of *A Celt in Rome* on historical truths such as travel patterns, key historical figures and sites, and Greco-Roman religion. His research extended to other mainstream cultural norms such as stoicism, eastern religions, currency, and other things that were important in creating a very vivid picture for readers. Overall, William V. Crockett does very well to use his obviously extensive research to introduce historically reliable pieces of information in order to paint a landscape of the Roman Empire in the second century that better enhances the reality early Christians faced.

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References

Crockett, William V. *A Celt in Rome*. Hudson Publishing, 2012.

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